

Breathlessness

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What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness describes feeling winded or short of breath. It may feel as though you can't take a deep breath or get enough air. Your chest could feel tight and you may even feel as though you're gasping for air at times.

These sensations can occur when you're exerting yourself or when you're not doing anything.

It is common for people recovering from COVID-19 to feel breathless. However, in most cases, the actual amount of oxygen in the blood is normal.

Why you may feel breathless

With long COVID, there are three factors that may contribute to your sensations of breathlessness.

1. **Physical changes to your lungs:** For some people, there may be changes to their lungs after a COVID infection. There is no cure for this, but it can improve over time. Most people with long COVID show no abnormalities on lung tests but still experience breathlessness.
2. **Changes to your autonomic nervous system:** Breathing is vital to survival, and so when you have difficulty breathing, it can activate your natural “fight or flight” response. Many people with long COVID have an overactive sympathetic (fight or flight) branch of the autonomic nervous system. This means you might feel breathless more easily, which can make you breathe faster or hyperventilate and can make you feel panicky.
3. **How your chest moves when you breathe:** Many people with long COVID have been found to breathe primarily into just the upper chest and to breathe too quickly. Breathing this way uses more energy than breathing with a more normal pattern. This way of breathing also contributes to worse feelings of breathlessness over time by disrupting the levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. To learn more about the effects of a disrupted breathing pattern on the body, see [Breath Work](#).

What you can do over the long-term

Right now, there is no cure for any physical changes that may have happened in your lungs, but the good news is that these changes seem to

improve over time.

While you wait for your breathing to improve, you can practice the basic [breath control](#) exercise that can:

1. Help calm your autonomic nervous system by decreasing your heart rate and breathing rate and allowing your muscles to relax
2. Retrain your breathing pattern to make it more efficient and decrease other effects on your body

We recommend that you do the basic [breath control](#) exercise at least 3 to 4 times per day for 3 to 4 minutes at a time.

It's easiest to start by practicing in a comfortable resting position, either sitting or lying down.

Try adding this to the regular “true rest” breaks that are also recommended to help you with energy conservation. Remember, all of your symptoms, including breathlessness, will get worse with overexertion. Therefore, pacing and energy conservation strategies are extremely important for reducing your feelings of breathlessness. (Please see [Pacing](#), [Heart Rate Monitoring](#), and [Energy Conservation](#) topics in *MyGuide* for more info.)

Recovery strategies to help regain control over your breathing when you are experiencing

breathlessness

1. Find your recovery position.

Try getting into a resting position that makes it feel easier to breathe (leaning forward helps). Then, consciously try to relax any muscles you don't need to breathe (such as your hands, arms, and neck). A good way to remember is to "Flop, drop, and lean forward."

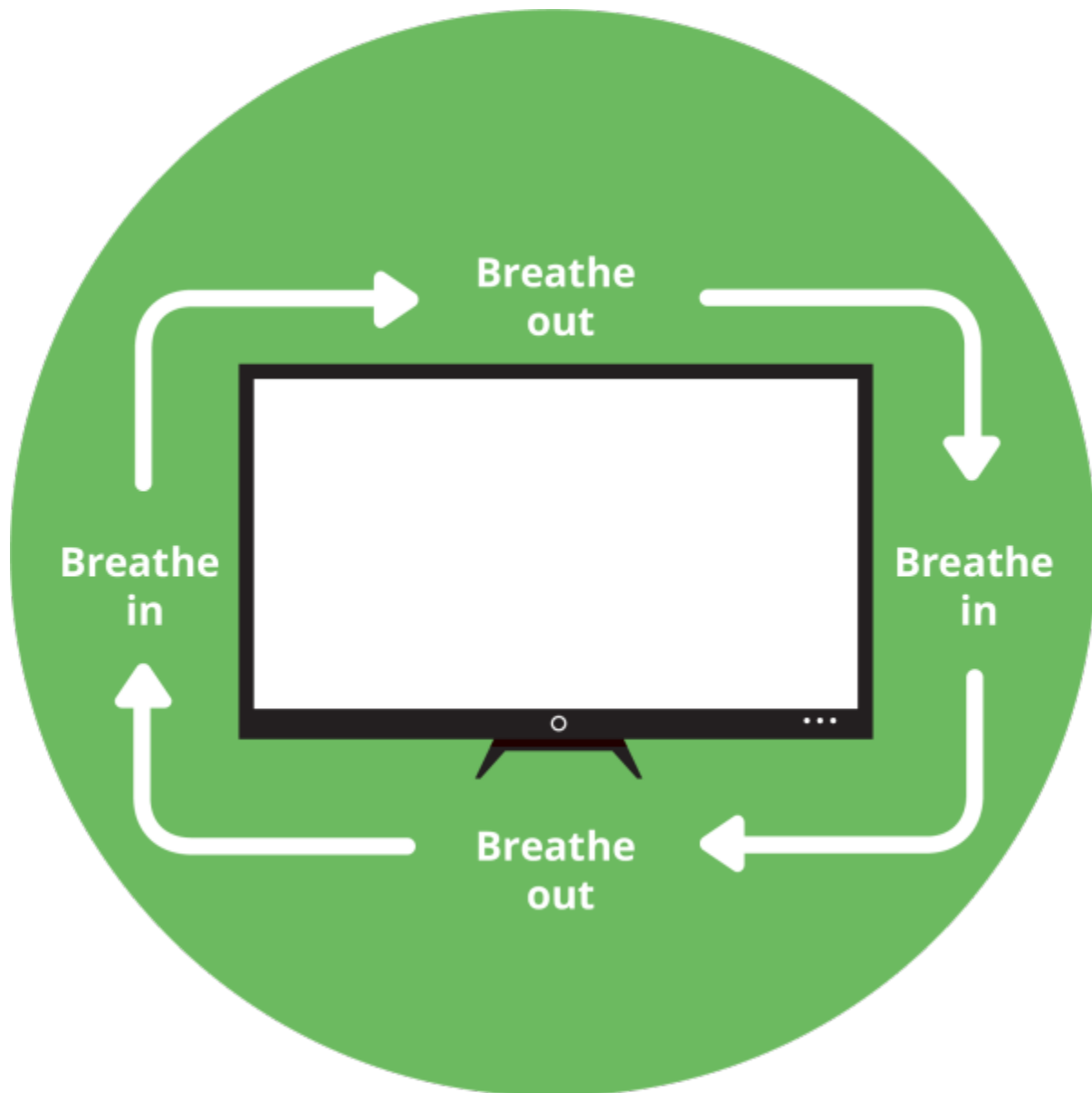
2. Breathe through pursed lips.

Try creating a slight resistance with your lips when you breathe. Purse your lips, as if you're whistling or blowing out birthday candles, and breathe in and out through your mouth. When you regain control over your breathing, start breathing in (inhaling) through your nose and keep breathing out (exhaling) through your pursed lips.

Recovery strategies to help regain control over your breathing when you are experiencing breathlessness

3. Try rectangle breathing.

When your breathing is under control, find an object in your space that is rectangle shaped - such as a TV, a window, or a doorway. It should have shorter sides and longer sides. With your eyes, follow the longer side of the rectangle as you breathe out and follow the shorter side as you breathe in. This will help you to breathe out for longer, which helps to stimulate your parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system and bring you a sense of calm.



Where to next?

- Check [Breath Work](#) to learn more about the effects of a disrupted breathing pattern on the body
 - Jump to Frame 3 of this topic for the basic breath control exercise.
- Check [Pacing](#), [Heart Rate Monitoring](#), and [Energy Conservation](#) topics in *MyGuide* to learn more about pacing and energy conservation strategies.

